

A New Urartian Urn Burial from Argishtikhinili

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Various types of burials have been and are still being brought to light during construction work in the inhabited areas of Nor Armavir village, Ararat plain, Republic of Armenia.¹ These burials are part of the north necropolis of the town of Argishtikhinili built by the Urartian king Argishti I in 776 BC in the country of Aza (Melikishvili 1960, 127, IV, 128, B2 137; Arutyunyan 1966, 80–84). The necropolis adjoins the Western Fortress of the town and dates to the first half of the 8th century BC, as it is covered by the blocks of houses built during the reign of Sarduri II (Martirosyan 1974, 53).

One of the burials found in 1990 was a cremation burial containing two urns buried upright at a depth of about 0.7 m below the ground surface. They were closed by bowls placed upside down. The urns are medium-sized jars of middle size with slightly elongated and rounded bodies, slim necks and everted rims. The first vessel is covered with a red slip and is thoroughly polished (fig. 12). The red bowl, closing the first urn, was polished in same way. The bowl is not deep, it has a flat base and an incurving rim (fig. 10). The second urn, coarser than the first one, has a surface of light ochre color, with traces of slight polishing (fig. 13). The bowl which closed this urn is slightly deeper than the first one, with a carination and everted rim and a brown surface (fig. 11). These bowls are amongst the most widespread types of Urartian tableware and are well represented at all Urartian sites (Martirosyan 1974, fig. 67, 4; 68, 6; Esayan/Kalantaryan 1988, pl. XIX, fig. 8, 11; pl. L, fig. 10; Kroll 1976, Abb. 14/14, 24/3, 8, 44/1).

The jar forms are also quite common on Urartian sites not only for kitchen use, but also as tableware. Both of the vessels have two holes bored through their shoulders before they were used as burial urns. The red polished vessel contained the ashes of the dead and the other one contained his possessions.

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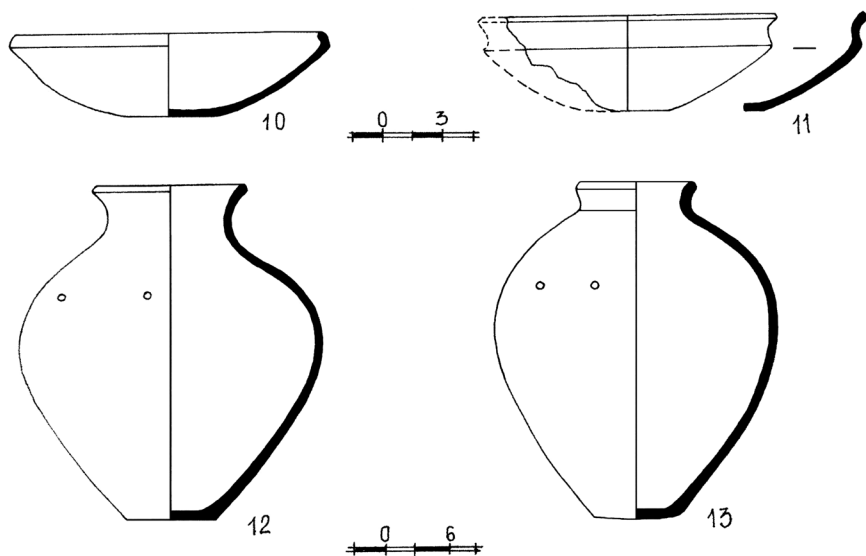


Fig. 10–13: Vessels from the urn burial

This burial is comparable in every detail with the first one opened in the Nor Aresh columbarian (graveyard of Erebuni fortress). This grave contained two vessels supported by small stones. In the black polished bowl there were the funeral artifacts and the red one contained only the ashes of the deceased (Martirosyan/Mnatsakanyan 1958, 63).

All the artifacts found from the Nor Armavir grave show some traces of cremation. The ceremony of cremation had been done elsewhere and then the remains were collected, put into the urns and buried. These urns belong to the wide range of burial vessels from various already known and studied sites: the Igdir and Yerevan graveyards, Argishtikhinili, Artskeh, Lich, Dedeli, and Altintepe (Kuftin 1944, tab. II, fig. 2–7; Barnett 1963, fig. 12; Esayan et al. 1995, pl. V, fig. 1–5; Martirosyan 1974, fig. 17; Martirosyan/Torosyan 1986, pl. I, fig. 1–4; Ögün 1978, pl. CLVII, fig. 15, 18; Emre 1969, fig. 2, 3; Barnett/Gökçe 1953, pl. XVI, fig. 2–4).

As far as the studies have shown ordinary domestic ceramic vessels, including enormous storage jars (pithoi), handleless, single and two-handled jugs, and other types of jars, were used as urns and this may account for the great variety of their forms. The presence of holes in the urns may be explained by the belief in the immortality of the soul. The soul was believed not to leave the body even after cremation and needed to be able to move and contact the outer world. This belief is indicated by the presence in the Urartian pantheon of a deity that “transferred the souls”

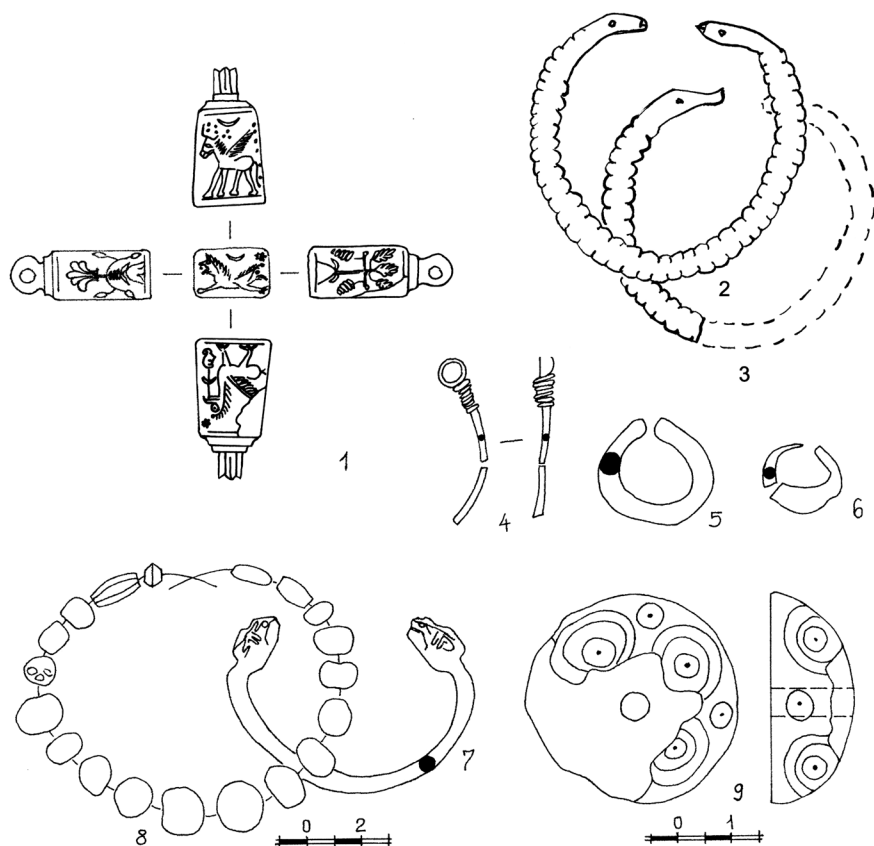


Fig. 1-9: Urartian seal and other objects from the urn burial

(Melikishvili 1960, no. 27, line 9, 45; Kapantsyan 1975, 191; Kuftin 1944, 69-70; Hmayakyan 1990, 78).

The articles, which accompany the dead, do not differ from those, which up till now have been found in other Urartian burials. The hemispherical limestone object with a central drill hole has lost its color and is cracked throughout because of the burning (fig. 9). The bronze ring (fig. 5) and earring (fig. 6) are also damaged. One of the most interesting objects is the fragment of a small silver spoon with a thin wire curled around the handle (fig. 4). Since the third millennium such spoons were components of cosmetic sets consisting of a tiny spoon, tweezers and different sharp instruments: e.g. a set in gold from the Royal Cemetery of Ur, one in copper from Susa, and another in silver in Munich (Woolley 1934, 51. 245;

pl. 137 b: U.9340; de Mecquenem 1943, 55f. fig. 47, 7; Zahlhaas 1991, 197 no. 57, first millennium). The explanation for the curling wire is given by comparison with the Ur example. Woolley (1934, 51) wrote: "The three instruments have loops at the top made by thinning out the stem and bending it over and securing it by whipping round the shaft." Among the bracelets (figs. 2, 3 and 7) a massive, big one with a smooth body and dragonshaped heads (fig. 7) is quite attractive. This is a well-known Urartian jewelry type. Despite the damage caused by the fire, the carefully worked details of the bracelet are still apparent. The engraved eye sockets with clearly visible eyebrows over them, the protruding ears and the wide nostrils make a rather vivid impression. Such bracelets have also been found in the Igdir, Nor Aresh, and Yerevan graveyards and in the necropolises of Argishtikhinili, Karmir Blur, Artskeh, and Dedeli (Kuftin 1944, 39, 40; Martirosyan/Mnatsakanyan 1958, pl. 2; Esayan et al. 1995, pl. XV, fig. 2–4, 6; Martirosyan/Torosyan 1986, pl. I, 7; Piotrovsky 1970, fig. 79; Ögün 1978, pl. CLXIV, fig. 50–51; Yengibaryan 2002, pl. I, fig. 1). They are also found in local settlements in Armenia such as Moukhannat-tapa, Astghadzor, Atarbekyan, Bjni, and Kamo (Esayan 1964, pl. 2).

A necklace (fig. 8) consisting of large, spherical and barrel-shaped carnelian and agate beads with faded colors and in cracks was found in the burial. Similar beads are known from Urartian and other sites in Armenia.

The most interesting object of our study is the clay seal (figs. 1, 14–15) (height 2.8 cm, loop height 0.8 cm, loop diameter 0.8 cm, width 1.4 cm, depth 1.0 cm). Such clay seals are not new in Urartian sphragistics and clay seals have been found in Karmir Blur, Igdir and Karchagbyur (Piotrovsky 1950, p. 74, No. 8; Piotrovsky 1952, p. 45, 47, Nos. 10, 16, 21, and 23; Piotrovsky 1955, p. 56, No. 27; Kuftin 1944, fig. 33/1; Barnett 1963, fig. 40).

The clay of the above mentioned seal is, however, unique, in its high quality and high degree of firing. K. Navasardyan, a ceramic specialist, has established that this seal was made of highly refined and well-mixed clay and fired at a temperature of 1100–1200 C° and this is the reason that it was not affected during the cremation.²

This seal is undoubtedly an article of local production. Two workshops have been excavated in Argishtikhinili, a workshop of a stone cutter and that of a seal-maker, one at the small temple and the other in house No. 6 together with semi-finished and finished seals (Martirosyan 1974, 109, 163). This seal has the shape of a truncated pyramid with a rectangular

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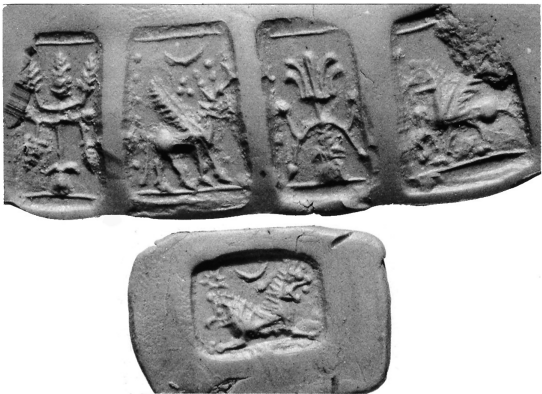


Fig. 14



Fig. 15

base and a suspension loop. The loop is decorated with two longitudinal grooves and is connected with the body of the seal by a rectangular pedestal. The base and all the sides are engraved. The engravings on the sides include carved lines at the top and bottom. On the two wide sides and on the base mythological animals are carved accompanied by celestial bodies and there are stylized trees on the narrow sides.

A composite animal formed out of the front parts of a sitting lion and an eagle is depicted on the base. The lion has a thick mane and protruding ears with his mouth wide-open and his front paws tensely stretched out. The eagle is depicted with his neck feathers erect, his beak half-opened, an expressive eye and wide spread claws. There is a star above the eagle's head and a crescent moon above the middle of the animal. On one of the wide sides a standing eagle is engraved with his neck stretching up, his tail in the shape of a triangle and an intense staring look. Suspended by a thread from his beak hangs a human head in profile. The man's eye, nose and hair style are clearly visible. A star is depicted above the head of the eagle. A winged bull, his head raised up with pride, with very long horns and tail, is engraved on the second wide side. He is standing surrounded by dots. There are seven dots between his wings and horns ($4 + 3$), a crescent moon is carved above those dots and there are six other dots at the back of the bull on the edge of the field. These composite creatures are looking towards the stylized tree, engraved on the narrow side, which is between them. The lower part of the tree consists of various elements and the upper part is topped by a palmette: from the middle of the tree stretch forked branches with elongated arrowhead shaped buds. The tree engraved on the fourth side grows on a triangle and its branches situated in the center are bent with ripe fruit. The seal and the engravings are done almost perfectly and with great taste.

The closest parallel to our seal is an Urartian seal kept in the British Museum (Collon 1987, no. 399): on the base of this seal is carved an eagle, which carries a human head. There is also part of a bronze belt found by chance on the territory of Urartian Archu (ancient Arksata – Shahtahti; Karageozyan 1998, p. 128–129), on which an eagle carrying a human head is shown flying away from a decapitated body (Bahşaliyev 1997, 117, fig. 26). Another monster being composed of protomes from different animals can be seen on a seal in Munich (Seidl 1979, 149 no. D 15; pl. 42,1).

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